Discovering Early California Afro-Latino Presence

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Juan Bautista de Anza
National Historic Trail

Among the earliest non-indigenous residents of California were hundreds of people of African background who descended from slaves taken to Mexico during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These *Afro-Latinos*, as they have come to be called, helped shape the character of California much as Puritans shaped the character of New England. They blazed trails and established towns and ranches that grew into major cities like Los Angeles, San Diego, Monterey, and San Jose. Several amassed considerable fortunes and acquired high-ranking positions in the military and government.

Unlike the United States, where people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds were largely segregated, early nineteenth-century California was a place where Afro-Latino, mestizo, European, and Indian lived side by side and frequently intermarried. In general, California provided Afro-Latinos with opportunities for social, economic, and political advancement they would otherwise not have in Mexico, where special rights and privileges were reserved to Spaniards of "pure blood." In California, Afro-Latinos acquired vast tracts of land and served as military officers or government officials. By contrast, most African Americans in the United States in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were enslaved. Even free African Americans enjoyed few, if any, legal rights in the United States.

Africans first entered Mexico in 1519, when Juan Garrido, a black soldier, served under Hernán Cortés in the defeat of the Aztec empire. The Spanish enslaved Mexico's indigenous peoples and forced them to work in mines and on haciendas. But as the indigenous population declined, Spanish colonists soon turned toward African slaves to satisfy their labor needs. Between 1580 and 1670, roughly 100,000 slaves, mostly Africans, were taken to Mexico. Perhaps as many as 50,000 Africans had been sent to Mexico before 1580; by 1645, Mexico had a slave population of 80,000.

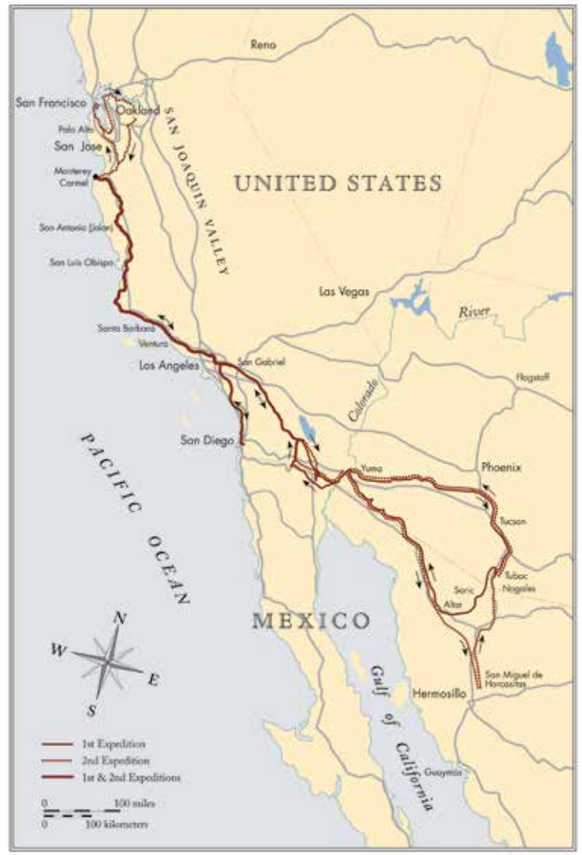
By the eighteenth century, free blacks outnumbered slaves and had a noticeable presence in Mexico City, Puebla, and Vera Cruz. Others were dispersed throughout the countryside and mining centers like Culiacán, Sinaloa, and Zacatecas. Many Spaniards never fully let go of the idea that freedom was the natural condition of all human beings, and the Spanish showed less hostility toward free blacks than the English did in their colonies in North America and the Caribbean. Nonetheless, free blacks in Mexico—especially those in Mexico City and Puebla—faced many obstacles. Some cities passed laws that kept them from obtaining land or entering certain skilled professions. This may explain why some free blacks moved into the frontier regions of Mexico, where they encountered much less discrimination. By the eighteenth century, free black communities had sprung up in towns and districts northeast of Mexico City in places like Rosario (now El Rosario), Mazatlán de los Mulatos (now Mazatlán), Cosala, Villa Sinaloa (now Sinaloa de Leyva), Durango (now Victoria de Durango), Culiacán (now Culiacán Rosales), Parral (now Hidalgo del Parral), and Horcasitas. By the late eighteenth century, Mazatlán and other peripheral towns included Afro-Latino soldiers, merchants, artisans, priests, mayors, councilmen, ranchers, and farmers.

So how did Afro-Latinos eventually find their way to modern-day California? *Answer:* The Juan Bautista de Anza Expedition. In 1774, Spanish Captain Juan Bautista de Anza led an expedition that, with the aid of Native Americans, opened up a new supply route from northern Sonora to California. Shortly after his return to Mexico City, Anza organized another expedition that included dozens of families he recruited in Culiacán, Villa Sinaloa, Altar, and Horcasitas. These and other towns in Mexico's northwest supplied California with many of its earliest settlers.

With the establishment of the Anza trail, Afro-Latinos migrated to California in significant numbers. By 1790, they made up nearly 20 percent of California's population, or one out of every five residents. More importantly, the concept of "race" had far less significance in California than in the United States. While European-born Spaniards controlled California society, Afro-Latinos and mestizos did manage to gain political and economic influence during the Spanish and Mexican periods of California history.

Some notable examples of Afro-Latinos who played prominent roles in California's development were Juana Briones, Manuel Nieto, Pío Pico, and Tiburcio Tapia. Juana Briones, whose mother and grandparents came to California with the Anza Expedition in 1776, became a

LEFT: Edward Vischer, *A California Magnate [Andrés Pico] in His Home,* 1865. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, BANC PIC 19xx.039:33—FR. CENTER: Map of New Spain showing solar eclipse, Mission San Diego, 1688. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Map G 04411 B1 1688 P6 Case A. RIGHT: Captain Juan Bautista de Anza. National Park Service photo.



Anza Expedition Routes

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fixture in Yerba Buena (now San Francisco) during the nineteenth century. Briones developed a reputation for being a savvy businesswoman, landowner, humanitarian, and healer. Manuel Nieto entered Alta California in 1769 as one of the leather-jacket soldiers in Gaspar de Portolá's expedition from Mexico. He later acquired 158,000 acres in Southern California, which included the modern cities of Long Beach, Huntington Beach, Norwalk, and Downey. At the time of his death in 1804, Manuel Nieto's real estate and large herds of horses and "black cattle" made him the wealthiest man in California. Pío Pico came from a very well-known Afro-Latino family that became one of the most wealthy and powerful in Mexican-era California. In addition to his success in acquiring extensive landholdings, Pico became California's last governor under Mexican rule. Tiburcio Tapia served as a soldier at Santa Barbara before assuming duties as corporal of La Purísima Mission (present-day Lompoc). In 1839 Tapia was granted 13,045 acres by Governor Juan Bautista Alvarado in an area east of Los Angeles called "Cucamonga." By the 1840s, Tapia had become one of Southern California's wealthier landowners and merchants. He was also politically connected and served as a member of the provincial legislature, three-term mayor of Los Angeles, and a judge.

Unfortunately for Afro-Latinos and Mexicans living in California, dramatic changes occurred after the United States took over in 1848. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the U.S. pursued an aggressive policy of westward expansion, seeking additional land for its population of land-hungry settlers. In 1846 President James K. Polk provoked a war with Mexico that many saw as nothing more than an opportunity to seize Mexico's northern provinces (now California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Colorado, Oklahoma, and Texas). The Mexican-American War endured for two years and ended with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. The treaty ceded all of the northern provinces to the United States. The discovery of gold that same year opened the floodgates to white settlement. Thousands of Americans entered the territory and many squatted illegally on property belonging to Mexicans. Thousands of Mexicans would eventually lose their property in U.S. courts that rejected Spanish and Mexican-era land titles. Others would be forced to sell off portions of their property or in some cases all of it to attorneys or other individuals to cover the cost of litigation.

During the Spanish and Mexican periods of California's history, race had not played a central role in determining one's social rank. But as soon as California was transferred to the U.S., the territorial government quickly adopted laws that stripped away the rights of Mexicans, Asians, African Americans, and Native Americans. The California constitutional convention of 1849, for instance, voted to disfranchise "Indians, Africans, and descendants of Africans." The following year it limited membership in the state militia to "free white males," prohibited nonwhite testimony in court cases involving whites, and adopted vagrancy laws that created a system of Indian slavery that remained in effect until the end of the Civil War. While denying blacks the right to testify on their own behalf, the state legislature voted that blacks who had entered the state before 1850 could be detained by anyone who claimed them as ex-slaves.

Indeed, much had changed in California from the time of Anza's arrival to the transfer of California to the United States. It began as a place that afforded Afro-Latinos like the Tapias and the Picos a transition from poverty to prosperity, a place where they could have title to thousands of acres of land, exercise political power, and be treated with respect. The vast majority of African Americans in the United States, meanwhile, still languished in chattel slavery. California had been a remarkably diverse and vibrant region where people of different "races" lived and worked together. Above all, it had been a place where race and ethnicity did not function as impediments to social, political, or economic advancement.

Today, it is critical for us to understand the early history of California because we still struggle with the legacy of racism. Most people mistakenly believe that racism has been an intrinsic part of our society since the beginning of our state's history. But any analysis of pre-1848 California society will show a much different picture.

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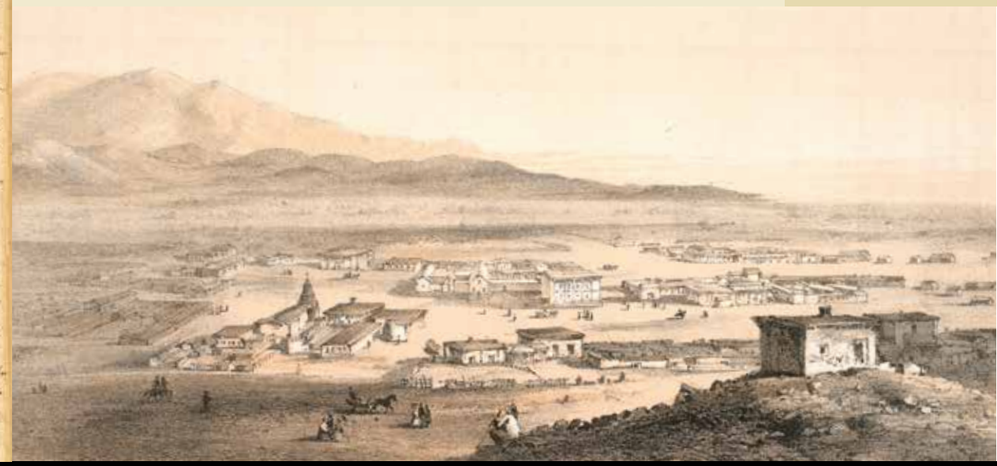
Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail

In 1990, Congress established the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail as part of the National Trails System. The trail commemorates, protects, marks, and interprets the route that Anza traveled during 1775 and 1776 from Sonora, Mexico, to take settlers to present-day San Francisco, California, to establish a mission and presidio. For information about the trail, visit the trail website at www.nps.gov/juba.



From left to right: Governor Pío Pico. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Portrait Collection, Pico, Pío, 1801–1894.

General Don Andrés Pico, 1878. Photograph by V. Wolfenstein. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Portrait Collection, Pico, Andres, 1810–1876.

Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Limits and Settlement between the United States of America and the Mexican Republic (also known as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo), 1848. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Los Angeles, ca. 1850s. Roughly half of the pueblo's founders were Afro-Latino. Robert B. Honeyman, Jr. Collection of Early Californian and Western American Pictorial Material. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, BANC PIC 1963.002:0478:10—A